

ARTICLE 1
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Verifying arms limits could become futile

By Bill Gertz
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Future arms control limits agreed to by the Soviet Union will be difficult to verify as strategic weapons systems become increasingly complex and mobile, defense analysts said yesterday.

"We're really getting into a situation where the numbers of missiles and numbers of warheads are just about impossible to verify," said James T. Hackett, an arms control analyst at the Heritage Foundation.

U.S. and Soviet negotiators concluded a series of arms control discussions in Moscow last week as a prelude to a possible summit between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev later this year.

The Soviets have indicated they will not participate in a summit without some progress toward an arms agreement.

"We've moved from counting launchers to seeking limitations on warheads, which adds to the difficulty of verifying any agreement," said Barry M. Blechman, an arms control specialist at

Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

New generations of sea-launched cruise missiles — low-flying nuclear drones — also will create verification problems because the missiles are small enough to be fired from submarine torpedo tubes, yet can strike targets thousands of miles away, said Mr. Blechman, a former Arms Control and Disarmament Agency official.

"That makes every submarine or surface ship with a torpedo tube a potential cruise missile carrier," he said. "You then have to make complicated counting rules and develop provisions so if the Soviets say a certain class of submarine doesn't have torpedo tubes, you then have to be permitted some sort of on-site inspection."

Brookings Institution arms specialist Raymond L. Garthoff agreed that cruise missiles create "special problems" for verifying both U.S. and Soviet arms levels.

"It is possible, and indeed our intention, to vary the load on nuclear submarines," he said. "A given type of

submarine might have a couple or a couple dozen missiles, and that makes it very difficult for both sides to monitor specific numbers."

Trends toward Soviet deployment of land-based mobile strategic missiles will also complicate verification of arms treaties, analysts say.

The CIA estimates that by the mid-1990s more than half the Soviet land-based nuclear warheads will be loaded on mobile launchers. At present, only a small percentage of Soviet missiles are mobile.

The Heritage Foundation's Mr. Hackett, who also serves on the Reagan administration's General Advisory Committee on Arms Control, said Soviet mobile missiles — the operational, road-mobile SS-25 and the SS-24 railroad version expected to be deployed later this year — present major obstacles to verifying arms control agreements.

"We just don't have good data on how many they produce," he said. "And if you don't know how many they have, they can move them around under cover of darkness, so we don't know where they are from one day to the next."

Mr. Blechman and Mr. Garthoff said U.S. spy satellites are capable of providing adequate verification of the new mobile Soviet missiles.

But both analysts said covert deployments of Soviet systems in violation of arms agreements would be difficult to detect.

"If a very special effort were made to conceal their missiles and [use] a different kind of command arrangement, then the problems of being able to detect with assurance the exact numbers and levels of deployment are more difficult," Mr. Garthoff said. "Some kind of surreptitious deployment would be a real challenge [for verification]."

Mr. Blechman said: "It's possible [the Soviets] have duplicate systems now existing somewhere hidden that we've never seen" with spy satellites.

"It's impossible to design verification provisions that are foolproof," he said, even though U.S. technical intelligence systems needed for arms control verification are expected to improve by the mid-1990s.